

Joseph B. Bustillos
110 North Euclid
Fullerton, CA 92632

About 1,000 words
First Serial Rights
Copyrights 1984 Joseph B. Bustillos

SUBLIMINAL ETHNICITY

by

Joseph B. Bustillos

Ethnicity. At my wedding my Pastor made a passing comment to my mother about "How nice it is that Kim and Joe got together, coming from different backgrounds and all."¹ I'd understood the comment to refer to the fact the Kim and I grew up under different family arrangements and had different educational experiences, and how nice it was that the Lord brought us together. Unfortunately my mother saw it as some sort of ethnic put-down.

Even before leaving San Gabriel² in the 50's my parents had pretty much acclimated to the larger culture around them. They had been fortunate and resourceful enough to be a part of America's Post-War Prosperity and any reminder of their

¹As if it wasn't bad enough that I wasn't being married in the Catholic Church then my well-meaning very-Anglo Presbyterian pastor made that comment . . . What a way to begin married life.

²My parents were born and raised in San Gabriel, CA of parents that immigrated to this country sometime around the First World War. San Gabriel lies in that area of Metropolitan Los Angeles that would eventually be called East L.A., L.A.'s major Barrio.

"heritage" by an outsider was in some way a denial of their full rights as paying customers on this voyage. They weren't like some minorities with a chip on their shoulder who lamented their supposed less-than-privileged status. But having chosen that road somewhere between San Gabriel and the fabled American Melting-Pot there were more than a few volunteers to remind us of our ethnic "heritage" and how fortunate we were to be here.³

Having been raised in white neighborhoods all my life, my Ethnic Self-identity suffered from that sense of not really belonging. I'd essentially come to see myself as a white kid with a Spanish surname and an appreciation for good Mexican food. But no matter how well I identified with my surroundings, on the basis of my last name alone, I was always "that short Mexican kid that lives down the street," or just "Joe Burrito." Not that I have any problems with being called a Mexican, I am one (I think), I just wonder what they mean by what they say. I mean, I have yet to hear someone refer to another individual, second generation American, no accent, maybe a serving of Sour Kraut once or twice a month, as "that short German kid that lives down the street." There's a subtlty here that disturbs me.

I am about as "Oreo" a Mexican as they come.⁴ So why the

³A In 1977 my father (self-taught landscaper who spent many years digging ditches for college grads who couldn't landscape themselves out a sand box) made his way into a "White-collar" position at the Irvine Company in the early 70's. (Can you tell I'm proud of the man?) He took us from Walnut Creek, CA (near Oakland), where we'd been for two years to an little known collection of track homes just north of San Juan Capistrano (in Southern California) called Mission Viejo.

⁴An "Oreo" Mexican is a Mexican that looks Mexican on the outside (Black hair, brown eyes, olive skin, etc.) but inside

differentiation? Why the preferential treatment, the EEOC quotas, etc.?⁵ To make right the wrongs of racism committed in the past? Then why the almost simultaneous prejudice? Why this persistent distinction?⁶ What it seems to boil down to is that we are Ethnically more of what we think we are than what we may actually be. Subliminal Ethnicity. In my white neighborhood I was the token Mexican kid but when we went to San Gabriel I was the "Oreo" that didn't fit in. Subliminal Ethnicity. The road back to San Gabriel is paved with memories for my parents but for me and my siblings it doesn't exist, though our white neighbors always seem to assume it does.

And as more groups are swallowed by the Monolithic Caucasian culture it's important that those of us that are aware of our ethnic heritage (even if it's just subliminal) retain it and express it for the right reasons. Too often ethnicity has been used as a means of exclusion from being a part of the whole. Even in a setting such as ours where Ethnic groups seem to have a voice in our social policies, if this voice, this platform is

he's as white as Jerry Falwell (political views not included). What is white anyway? I've never seen a **White** person. I've seen some that come awfully close. But if we're going to be honest with ourselves we might as well confess that we are all just different shades of the same color.

⁵In my case, five years of undergraduate work at two private universities funded by the State of California to a large extent because of that infamous surname of mine.

⁶I may have not been refused a seat on a bus or admittance to a restaurant or theater or employment opportunities because of my race but I have had my share of relationships with females end because of a parent's "concern" over the "unnaturalness" of the relationship. You'd think I was a Cholo or some'ting.

just a means to placate the demands of the minorities than we are obviously still not part of the whole. The important thing to me (coming from my white neighborhood and all) is not to see my ethnicity in distinction over again my white neighbor (whose only concept of heritage or history is completely egocentric -- patterns of our existential ideal?) but to see it as something greater than I that has had a part in making me the kind of person that I have become. It is a point of unity, a point of community. It is family. For those of us that are Hispanics, it is our common Hispanic experience. And for all of mankind, if we're willing to face it, it is the common human existence. Subliminal Ethnicity.

XXX